



CITY OF  
WICHITA

# ***CITY NEWS***

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## **Old Town: A Vision, Rooted in History**

**Planning, Collaboration, Innovations Transform Old Town Wichita**

There is no mistaking Old Town, a 20-block neighborhood in Downtown Wichita, KS. Its brick-lined streets, loft residences, public plazas and thriving dining and entertainment establishments offer something every night of the week and contribute to the area's comeback and new identity as Downtown's hot spot.

Old Town Wichita, one of 10 American Planning Association Great Neighborhoods for 2008, is singled out for the City's bold vision, astute planning, collaborative partnerships and innovative practices that transformed a derelict warehouse and light industrial district into a bustling and successful mixed-use quarter.

The area was born during the 1870's as a collection of warehouses that utilized the Atchison Topeka, Santa Fe and Frisco rail lines that ran throughout Old Town, connecting Wichita to St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago and other points to the east. Old Town's railroad-lined streets served the retail and warehousing operations of several companies, including International Harvester. By 1911, Wichita was the nation's second-largest distribution point for agricultural implements.

As the country's transportation industry shifted from rail to interstate trucking, new warehouses were built at the city's edges. As a result, many of Old Town's historic buildings were boarded up and vacancy rates reached 70 percent.

Bringing back Old Town as a successful mixed-use district was neither easy nor quick. Community leaders, business groups and citizens, including the Old Town Association, began meeting and discussing plans to revitalize Old Town in the 1970s. Their efforts culminated with the *Old Town Development Plan* in 1983. Comprehensive in scope, the plan addressed urban design, opportunity sites, marketing, parking and funding. Five years later, the City selected Marketplace Properties as the preferred developer to begin redeveloping Old Town.

The next important step came in 1991, when Wichita adopted the Old Town Overlay District, which permits residential uses within the underlying Limited Industrial zoning. It also established design

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criteria, which allows modern high-density, mixed-use development to occur within the historic character of Old Town.

The same year, routine tests found groundwater contamination in a six-square-mile area that included Old Town. Rather than seek assistance through the federal Superfund program, Wichita took financial responsibility for the cleanup by creating an environmental Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district. Until then, no U.S. city had used this approach, which earned Wichita the 1992 Innovations in American Governments Award, by the Government Innovators Network at Harvard University Kennedy School of Government.

After the cleanup, several new restaurants and businesses opened in Old Town. By 1993, Wichita created a separate TIF district specifically for Old Town improvements. The City and Sedgwick County contributed \$4 million to start street improvements, pedestrian-level lighting, sidewalks, parking facilities and rehabilitation of the area that would house the new farmer's market.

Some of these improvements included paving several of long narrow streets with brick to preserve the historic character of the neighborhood and creating a parking district to promote shared parking. The City also eliminated curbs, provided wide sidewalks and preserved the boardwalks to ensure that citizens using bicycles, wheelchairs and strollers could easily move around Old Town. Two large public plazas were designed to host specialty events, festivals and concerts and to serve as informal gathering places to relax and play.

By 1996, Marketplace Properties partnered with some Nebraska developers to build the first mixed-use residential project in Old Town—a three-story warehouse, now known as the Mosley Street Place. The first floor was converted into retail spaces and the second and third floors were converted into one and two bedroom apartment units. It was followed by approximately 40 condominiums and more than 160 apartment conversions, 84 of which are available at below-market rental rates—providing housing opportunities and choices for a range of household types, family size and incomes.

In 1997, the historic Keen Kutter building was redeveloped into what is now the Hotel at Old Town. By 2003, the \$7 million construction of the Old Town Warren Theatre began in the Old Town Square Addition. Old Town Square also features mixed-use buildings with retail shops, offices, and apartments and a powerful green public space with a splash park, a 500-car public parking garage and the CityArts gallery, which offers art classes.

Old Town continues to make progress. In 2004, the 33-acre Warehouse and Jobbers Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, containing over 60 historic warehouse and industrial buildings in Old Town. Two of the most recent redevelopment projects include a mechanic shop that was converted into a bar and grill called the Pumphouse and an historic printing and publishing building that was transformed into the Courtyard by Marriott at Old Town, which opened in December of 2006.

Today Old Town is home to more than 130 businesses, including advertising, marketing, architecture, consulting and engineering firms in addition to numerous restaurant, pubs and theaters. Airbus's sole U.S. design and engineering facility is located on Mead Street. Property values have grown more than six-fold since 1992 and a proposal to extend Amtrak passenger service between Oklahoma City and Wichita is under consideration—another sign that Old Town's transformation might yet include something that helped define it a century ago.

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Old Town Wichita possesses a singular sense of place given its early Wichita architecture, vibrant atmosphere, variety of uses, diverse clientele and collaborative public and private commitment – all merging to ensure the continued success of one of the nation's great neighborhoods well into the future.